DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COMMANDER CAMERON NARON, DEPUTY CHIEF, COAST GUARD OFFICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2008

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Okay, Commander Naron?

CMDR. NARON: Yes?

SEAMAN SELBY: We're going to go ahead and get started, if you don't mind.

CMDR. NARON: Terrific.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. One second. Okay.

CMDR. NARON: Would you like me to start?

SEAMAN SELBY: Actually -- well, I have a -- I'm going to go ahead and get started with this and then we'll go on to your opening statement. Hello, I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, September 30, 2008. My name is Seaman William Selby with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

Note to our bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect our guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest is U.S. Coast Guard Commander Cameron Naron, deputy chief of the Coast Guard Office of Law Enforcement, who will provide and discuss interagency cooperation for drug interdiction efforts.

And Commander Naron, if you have an opening statement, you can go ahead with that now.

CMDR. NARON: I do.

Good morning. This is Commander Naron. I'd like to talk to you this morning about self-propelled semi-submersibles, which I will refer to as SPSSs throughout this conversation.

First I'd like to tell you a little bit about what a typical SPSS is. These are stateless vessels, typically less than 100 feet in length of steel construction, typically with four to five crew members on board and usually carrying up to 10 metric tons of illicit cargo for distances up to 5,000 miles. Drug trafficking organizations design SPSSs to sink themselves when they've detected law enforcement, thereby making contraband recovery usually impossible.

These vessels are typically built in the FARC-controlled jungles of Colombia. And the use of these vessels has grown in recent years as a means to counter effective drug interdiction efforts. Drug trafficking organizations continue to adapt these vessels and their transit means to our law enforcement successes. These SPSSs were once perceived as a very impractical and risky smuggling tool, but now have proven successful as an innovative and highly mobile asymmetrical method of conveyance.

I'd also like to talk to you about some recent SPSS cases that the Coast Guard and other drug interdiction agencies have been involved in. The first one, recently, was on the 13th of September. This was -- involved a U.S. Navy frigate with a United States Coast Guard law enforcement detachment. They seized a highly sophisticated but stateless 59-foot steel and fiberglass SPSS carrying approximately 11,850 pounds of cocaine during a nighttime interdiction.

This SPSS was originally detected by a U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft, under the tactical control of Joint Interagency Task Force South in Key West, Florida, and was detected 350 miles west of Guatemala in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. This vessel was -- oh, I'm sorry -- the maritime patrol aircraft, although low on fuel, was able to remain on scene just long enough to detect and direct the U.S. Navy frigate to this SPSS.

On this case, the Coast Guard law enforcement detachment embarked onto the flat outer hull of the SPSS, rapped on the hatch of the SPSS and ordered the vessel to stop. Immediately after the law enforcement detachment announced its presence, the startled smugglers attempted to throw our LEDET personnel into the sea by backing down the SPSS's engines quickly and reversing the engines on the SPSS. This maneuver threw our LEDET personnel about the flat top of the SPSS, and they had cling to exhaust structures to avoid being thrown into the ocean.

The Colombian traffickers then attempted to flood the SPSS and leave through the conning tower. Our law enforcement detachment was nevertheless able to recover, drew their weapons and ordered the smugglers to close the scuttling valves on the SPSS. Although the scuttling valves were only open for a few moments, nearly a foot of water had already entered the hull of this SPSS. The operator later admitted that he was trying to kill the boarding team by throwing them off the SPSS and into the vessel's propeller.

Four Colombian nationals were located aboard that SPSS, and one person claimed to be the master and made a verbal claim of Colombian nationality for the vessel, although he had no documents to support the claim, and there were no indicia of nationality on the vessel. The government of Colombia could neither confirm nor deny the master's verbal claim, which rendered this SPSS a stateless vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

The SPSS crew had enough fuel and supplies on this vessel to travel from South America to the continental U.S. without replenishing. The hull construction of that particular SPSS seemed to be more professional and sophisticated than we had seen previously, combining steel and fiberglass

construction with more sophisticated propulsion, steering and exhaust capabilities than we had observed on most earlier models.

One remarkable feature of this SPSS was its communication suite. It was state-of-the-art and rivaled those we had found on previous SPSSs or even most professionally constructed commercial vessels.

That SPSS is being brought to the U.S. for further investigation and the four detainees from that case will be prosecuted in the U.S. That was a case that I just described that occurred on the 13th of September.

And now I'd like to talk about a second case that occurred on the 17th of September of this year. On the 16th, the Coast Guard Cutter Midget interdicted and seized a fiberglass-hull 50-foot SPSS approximately 300 nautical miles south of the Mexican-Guatemalan border.

This SPSS was also initially detected by a U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft which maintained surveillance of that SPSS for a prolonged period. At one point, the maritime patrol aircraft observed the SPSS making course changes and trying to evade the aircraft.

On the 17th of September, during the early daylight hours, the Coast Guard Cutter Midget acquired the SPSS on radar and subsequently launched both of our -- of its small boats with a law enforcement boarding team on board. Upon approach by the small boats, the SPSS altered course, came to a slow speed of approximately three knots.

The four-person Colombian national crew emerged from the SPSS, surrendered and was embarked into the Coast Guard small boat. One of the crew members spontaneously asserted that the SPSS was engaged in fishing. The boarding team removed the four suspects from the SPSS to the Midget for officer safety, and the crew did not make any attempts to scuttle and was compliant throughout that boarding.

The boarding team subsequently gained positive control over the vessel and contraband was seized -- located and seized within the hull that tested positive for cocaine. The boarding team removed a total of 295 bales of cocaine totaling 14,750 pounds from that SPSS.

In the course of removing the cocaine, the vessel began taking on water and eventually sank on its own. The boarding team was able to disembark the SPSS and all the SPSS crew members were off of that vessel before it sank. And the four detainees from that vessel will also be prosecuted in the U.S. Then lastly, I'd like to describe a case that occurred on the 16th of July. In that case, another U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft detected an SPSS in the vicinity of the Gulf of Tehuantepec, Mexico, approximately 110 miles from the Mexican coast.

The Mexican navy responded to the sighting by deploying a helicopter with a Mexican special forces team that fast-roped onto that SPSS and seized it.

The Mexican forces apprehended four Colombians, in that case, who reported that they did not sink that vessel because they did not see a ship nearby and believed they would drown if they, if they flooded their SPSS. In that case, Mexican forces recovered over six tons of cocaine.

That's all that I have initially. And I'd be very happy to take your questions.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

Excuse me.

David, you were first on the line.

Q Good morning. This is David Axe with Wired's Danger Room blog.

So it sounds like Navy maritime patrol aircraft are your primary means of detecting these semi-submersibles. But is that, is that the case? If not, how else would you detect them?

CMDR. NARON: Right now maritime patrol aircraft, both Navy and Coast Guard, and we also have some allied maritime patrol aircraft that we work with; yes, they are the primary means of detecting this -- these vessels.

We have occasionally, both Coast Guard forces, Navy forces and other forces in the Caribbean have occasionally come across these vessels, I would say, really just by luck. But in the majority of cases, they have been detected from the air. Also before we go on, one thing I neglected to add at the beginning is, it's very significant, is yesterday actually last -- it was yesterday evening.

There was legislation passed by the House of Representatives that had previously been passed by the Senate that will, if signed by the president will create a 15-year criminal offense and a $1 million civil penalty for any persons operating or embarking in a stateless SPSS on an international voyage. And that's a tool that we have been hoping for, for enforcement purposes, for quite some time, and will help our enforcement efforts significantly, if signed by the president.

Q Hi, this is David again. Can you, can you hear me?

CMDR. NARON: Yes, I can.

Q Sorry. Mute problems.

Did you say that, so anyone would be in violation of the law if they were to embark on one of these semi-submersibles.

CMDR. NARON: Well, there are, there are very specific qualifications in this legislation.

The vessel, first of all, would have to be stateless. That means it's not registered or documented in any nation or registered in any state. It needs to be on an international voyage.

So I would not characterize that this would classify anyone and anything like an SPSS as a violation of that, what we hope will be a future law. But those qualifications will help us in our enforcement efforts significantly.

Q Okay. Thank you.

CMDR. NARON: You're welcome.

SEAMAN SELBY: Okay. And EagleSpeak?

Q Yeah. This is Eagle 1 from EagleSpeak blog. And commander, I've got a couple of questions for you. One is, is this an east -- are this situation occurring on both sides of Guatemala, you know, as traffic comes up from Colombia, seeing -- like through the streets of Yucatan and also up through the Gulf of Tehuantepec?

CMDR. NARON: Currently we've only encountered SPSSs in the Eastern Pacific.

Q Okay. And the second question is, as these things are getting more sophisticated, is there some concern -- let me start over again. There are a number of amateur submarine builders, many of whom have fairly sophisticated boats that they're using. Is there a concern that some of that technology is transferring to these drug smugglers?

CMDR. NARON: I really don't have any information on where the drug trafficking organizations are getting their technology. If you have information on that, we'd be very interested in it. So I could not theorize that they're getting it from other countries who've built similar craft in the past or hobbyists. I really don't know.

Q Thank you.

CMDR. NARON: You're welcome.

SEAMAN SELBY: Any follow-up questions?

Q Well, this is Eagle 1 again. Let me ask -- I notice that not only the U.S. is experiencing these problems with these SPSSs, but there appear to have been a couple of instances off Spain. Are you seeing a larger international effort in this area? Are you aware of those instances?

CMDR. NARON: Well, we do share the information with other countries. I am not aware of the cases off of Spain, but that doesn't surprise me. There is significant drug trafficking to Europe these days, and we are engaged in helping to counter that through Joint Interagency Task Force South. One significant thing tat we've seen, up until September of 2007, there were 23 SPSS events that we estimated in that 6-1/2-year -- in a 6-1/2-year period leading up to September of 2007, but those numbers ballooned in fiscal year '08. In the first three quarters of this fiscal year, we went from, as I said, 23 total estimated events in the past 6-1/2 years to 62 total events in only the first three quarters of this fiscal year. And we attribute that to the effectiveness of other enforcement efforts that have been in effect for a long time, and the drug trafficking organizations finding that this is something that they need to go to in order to move their cargoes.

Also, of the cases that we've actually interdicted or interrupted, I would say when we come across an SPSS that sinks itself before we're able to do anything with it -- just lost my train of thought, here. Oh, I would say those cases that we are actually aware of are estimated really to be only the tip of the iceberg. We have estimates that there are two to three of these -- of these that make their -- make their trips every week.

Q Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir. And David, did you have any follow-up questions?

Q No, that's all for me. Thanks.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Eagle 1?

Q Yeah, one more question, which at the -- what have we seen at the receiving end? Where are they -- are they -- are they bringing -- trying to bring these all the way up to the coast of California? What do they do with it when they get there? Are they meeting boats? Do you have any idea how they're -- how they're getting the stuff ashore?

CMDR. NARON: They do -- from what we've seen, the amount of fuel that they carry onboard, they actually have the range to bring it to the continental U.S. We do not currently believe that they're off- loading in the -- anywhere near the continental U.S. We believe that they're typically in Central American countries and then bringing the drugs into the U.S. through other conveyances.

Q Okay. Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Commander Naron, did you have any closing remarks today?

CMDR. NARON: I would say we are very happy that both the House and the Senate have passed this bill that I described that will help our efforts significantly.

And the reason for that is, as I described in some of these cases, interdiction of SPSSs is very dangerous business. These SPSSs are built to scuttle, which means to sink themselves very quickly. They're very, very difficult to detect. And the time -- the time that it takes to get onboard and try to keep them from scuttling is a very, very short amount of time that we have and puts our boarding teams at significant risk.

Up until now, in order to prosecute these cases, we've always needed to have at least a representative sample of the drugs on board. What this legislation does for us is even if the SPSS scuttles and we end up picking up the operators of the SPSS from a life raft or out of the water after it sunk, we will no longer need to have a representative sample of the drugs or the actual physical SPSS itself. This legislation will allow us to prosecute these people just based on the fact that they were operating this vessel, subject to the qualifications that I stated earlier.

So that will help our enforcement effort significantly to counter this, and hopefully this means of moving drugs into the U.S. and other places will be significantly reduced.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir, and thank you to all the bloggers for the questions and comments today. Today's program will be available online at bloggers' link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access the story based on today's call, along with source documents such as the audio file and print transcript.

Q Is Commander Naron still there?

SEAMAN SELBY: Yes.

CMDR. NARON: Yes, I am.

Q Okay. This is Eagle 1. There's a BBC story from August of 2006 which relates to the Spanish police locating a drug sub off their coast. I don't know if you want the website, but if you just Google "Spain" and "drug sub," it'll pop up for you.

CMDR. NARON: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Q You bet. Thank you again.

SEAMAN SELBY: And this concludes today's call. Feel free to disconnect at any time. Thank you again, sir, for your time.

CMDR. NARON: Thank you.

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